

Electronic Eavesdropping, or, So What Else Is New?

61991 Scientologists

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Since Christmas the more prestigious organs of the mass media have been lathering themselves about allegations of CIA-FBI spying on some of the more influential power babies in the upper class. The evidence suggests that since the mid-1960s federal agencies have stopped confining their illegal intrusions to politically unpopular groups.

Millionaires, members of Congress even, have become vulnerable, or so it appears. This last has ignited an investigatory zeal for the protection of their own rights that had not been aroused for the defense of the rights of others.

Or am I being unfair? The other day The Washington Post ran a front-page story informing the world that "FBI Tapped King at 1964 Convention." An article followed explaining that Dr. Martin Luther King's hotel room at the Democratic Convention had been bugged and his phone tapped.

What is astonishing about this is that scores of mass media executives have known for years that Dr. King was the object of illegal surveillance. They knew it when he was alive. Nor was this information known directly through secondary sources. They knew it because representatives of the FBI had come to them adding eavesdropped recordings concerning Dr. King's life.

No newspaper, north or south, was going to print that kind of stuff, and none did. Nevertheless they had been given incontrovertible proof by the government itself that the same government made it an ordinary practice to violate the civil rights of its critics.

If this knowledge caused the media to crank up its investigatory machinery, it has managed to keep news of it a closely held secret. The media performance is angled out here, however, only because it is so conspicuous. All the upper layers of power and influence have had hints for years that pariah groups, ranging from the John Birch Society to the Socialist Workers Party, were probably being seriously infringed upon. Now the power babes and the big richies complain, and it is not difficult to surmise why.

Even at this date, though, you don't hear a hue and cry for the treatment accorded even such innocuous groups as the Scientologists. These people have been added by the FDA and had the accoutrements of their

religion confiscated. They've been put on some of those nefarious government lists. They've had the tax exemptions of some of their churches snatched by the IRS, and lately they've been claiming that the CIA is spying on them, an accusation, given what we know about the CIA, that ought not to be dismissed out of hand.

The Scientologists have been harassed by the government for years. The legal fees they've been forced to pay to sustain their rights are so large they constitute a fine levied against them though they're guilty of nothing more than practicing their faith.

And it's their faith, not their politics, that gets them into trouble. Not only is it different, but it inspires in their adherents an irritating, evangelical tenacity that American are supposed to reserve for sports.

Unhappily for them, the Scientologists have invented a religion for themselves with a special appeal for a certain sort of middle-class adolescent. You might call it an "electronic Buddhism" in which the Divine Computer frees the soul or "thetan" for heaven knows what delicious reunions with the first principle of the universe. This amalgam of psychology, technology, sci-fi and ethics fetches young people, but while we like our teen-agers to go to church, we also only like them to go through the motions; so we assume when they get caught up in anything they're being brainwashed and the full power of the centralized state may be invoked to stop it. Scientology, of course, makes as much or as little sense as Presbyterianism, but since it's different and it hasn't been in business for 300 years, its members can be robbed of their First Amendment rights and no congressional investigations are convened.

The American Civil Liberties Union is making a major effort to use this Bicentennial period to focus attention on the violation of everybody's rights in hopes of preventing the government from tattooing our Social Security numbers on our forearms. (The ACLU is having a national conference on the subject in Chicago at the end of February.)

The ACLU understands that unless everybody's rights are protected, nobody's are. It was the failure to defend people like Dr. King and the Scientologists which led the government to violate the rights of the ultra-respectables and the power babies, so if Congress thinks it can protect itself without protecting the rest of us at the same time, Congress is going to get itself bugged again.

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